

# WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

*A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.*

## First Congregational Church



**T**he founding of the First Congregational Church of Terre Haute is linked to the unanticipated visit of Rev. Merrick Augustus Jewett in October 1834.

Ordained in Maryland, Jewett was heading for St. Louis on horseback to found a parish in the untamed west. That career objective was revised after he stopped at Capt. James Wasson's Eagle & Lion tavern in Terre Haute and was persuaded to preach the following Sunday.

No minister in local history had a more immediate impact on the citizenry than Jewett. Since David Monfort's departure from the First Presbyterian Church in 1829, the villagers relied on visiting and

itinerant pastors for spiritual guidance. The congregation became dissatisfied with Monfort's 1833 replacement, Rev. Michael Hummer.

Jewett agreed to stay if adequate support could be mustered to build a church. An Oct. 13, 1834, subscription amassed more than 50 pledges including community leaders like Amory Kinney, John F. Cruft and Joseph Graff. Jewett returned to Baltimore to bring his family to its new Wabash River home. Struggling to cope with the accidental death of a son on Christmas Eve, the bereaved parson conducted an organizational meeting at the Vigo County Courthouse on Dec. 30, 1834.

A brick building costing \$9,000 was dedicated at the southeast corner of Sixth and Cherry streets July 2, 1837. When Rev. Jewett's friend, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, a dynamic 29-year-old Indianapolis evangelist, held a revival there in 1842, the membership doubled.

A tornado on April 23, 1853 wrecked the original church, but a new \$20,000 structure was opened at the site in 1857.

Poor health forced Jewett's resignation in April 1860. He was succeeded by Rev. Lyman Abbott, a New England "Yankee" compelled to delicately steer a congregation encompassing diverse sympathies through the Civil War. Selected by President Lincoln to head the American Union Commission (later the American Freedmen's Bureau) during Reconstruction, Abbott resigned in 1865. He became the acclaimed editor of *The Outlook*, an influential political magazine; a prolific author; and Beecher's successor at the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn.

The church expanded in 1871 under the guidance of Rev. E. Frank Howe by soliciting funds through the sale of pews. By then, its patrons included a plethora of civic and business leaders. Noteworthy ministers followed Howe's service, including Rev. Henry M. Bacon and Rev. J. Leonard Corning.

The First Congregational Church dedicated its handsome edifice at 630 Ohio Street in 1903, and will soon celebrate 165 years as a vital community resource.

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